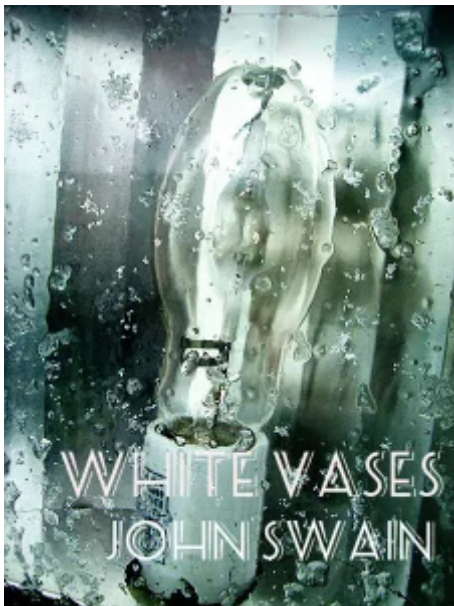


FEBRUARY 2, 2013 by NEW MIRAGE JOURNAL

## John Swain – White Vases (Crisis Chronicles Press, 2012): a review

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(<https://newmiragejournal.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/whitevasesjohnswainv10.jpg>)

This slight (21 pages) chapbook is interesting for a variety of reasons. I will adumbrate them here, rather in the fashion of a summary, so as to make especially clear the distinguishing features of Swain's work.

- Each of the sixteen poems takes up a separate page, but more often than not less than a whole page is utilized.
- There is no evidence of stanzas or rhyme throughout each and every poem, except one titled *Synchrony Lens*: this is not meant as criticism by any means, but is a distinguishing feature. Then there is his elementary punctuation!

- As related to the point immediately above, the impression is of density: compact lines and line lengths tautly sequestered onto the pages.
- The notion of density extends to the methodology involved in this collection as well. For each and every poem primarily consists of an image or images, but more than this, of some abstruseness of language and language sequence to the extent that one is often left pondering what exactly the poet is attempting to say, if indeed there is a message involved at all and not ‘merely’ the rainbow glow of the imagery involved. Examples of this obscurity abound – take, as just one, this from the titular poem:

...

*as if I burned*

*a completed work*

*to unchain today*

*then enter liberated*

*like an unhinged door*

*lying flat in the grass...*

- That said, there is indeed a concentration on Nature and physicality – not only of Nature and its inhabitants, but also of man-woman relationship(s), and in particular of a specific ‘me’/‘you’ bonding. Yet, given the abstruseness of language and its interpolation with image, the actual reference to the elements of Nature remain simple: *mollusk, urchin, jellyfish, fish crow, osprey* run free and abundant throughout Swain’s arboreal aquariums.

- A further mighty concentration on God, Christ and religious motifs (*tax collectors, locusts, plague, wilderness* pervade as in *Neither Eating*) also pervades these poems adding to the melding of who quintessentially is represented in the ‘me’/‘you’ conundrum previously outlined: indeed, in some poems, all three realms of theme prevail – religion, nature, gendered relationship.

- The overall summation by this critic is, then, that Swain weaves in a Christian mystic vision. He concentrates less on the craft of writing poetry, given several effective similes spread throughout his lines (examples being: *The world like a claw was too red; A lion crawled upon the hydra like a man torn between warships*) than on his impelled gushed epiphanies, one of a spirited spirituality springing from the cascades and torrents of springs and the animated antics of flora and fauna, permeated by close readings of both Testaments in the King James Bible. Another extrapolation:

*I jumped from a high rock*

*and the water let me become you*

indeed!

Interesting. And what better way to present the song-poetry of John Swain than to actually present the song-poetry. Let it be for itself rather than attempt to dissect it, perhaps:

Thorn

*I traced the branch  
of feathers and leaves  
sewn with ink  
down your lithe back.  
smoke from your mouth  
wrote a psalm,  
as I plea for release  
and endless captivity  
in this room  
where you bare yourself  
holy in darkness,  
we knotted like thorn  
forehead to forehead  
over our bent arms.*

Enough said

Review written by Vaughan Rapatahana

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